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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN TRIBAL GOVERNANCE 101, PART 2: SHEIKHS
AND THEIR ROLE

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¶1. Summary: This cable is the second of a three part series on internal governance in Jordan's tribal system. Sheikhs are the backbone of the tribal community, acting as informal mediators, employment agencies, moral guides, and the state's eyes and ears in the community. Sheikhs rise to leadership positions by nurturing reputations as problem solvers and faithful representatives of the community. It is helpful, but not necessary, to be wealthy when pursuing a career in tribal leadership. End Summary.

The Backbone of the Community

¶2. (SBU) Sheikhs are the public face of Jordanian tribes. As tribal representatives, sheikhs are not only leaders of the social community, they are also the primary conduit for communication between average Jordanians and the state. (Note: In Jordan, the term "sheikh" refers to a tribal, rather than a religious, leader. End Note.) Through their use of connections within the government, sheikhs act as "fixers" for members of their tribe by procuring jobs, mediating disputes, and generally greasing the wheels of the bureaucracy. They are responsible for protecting the interests of the community and intervening on its behalf with the state apparatus.

How To Become A Sheikh

¶3. (U) The path to positions of tribal leadership is often obscure. Aspiring sheikhs do not openly declare their intentions. Rather, they groom their reputations by providing services, building alliances with key members of the tribe, and seeking relationships with governmental gate keepers which they can parlay into favors later on. Sheikhs are generalists -- they must have an encyclopedic knowledge of local culture, politics, religion, and most of all tribal traditions. Ajaj Ata, a sheikh from the rural town of Azraq, says that the salons of tribal notables act as a sort of university for aspiring sheikhs, teaching younger leaders the structure of tribal authority while allowing them to see examples of judgment and leadership at work. Sheikhs even specialize in different kinds of disputes, which members of other tribes will appeal to for advice in difficult cases (for example, sheikhs from the Karak-based Majali tribe are consulted by other sheikhs on difficult murder cases, and sheikhs from the Tarawneh tribe, also from Karak, are recognized experts on the law of theft).

¶4. (U) The process of selecting a sheikh used to be more formal -- notables would gather and choose their leader in a caucus-type format. Some tribes retain this practice, but their number is shrinking. "The decision (of who will be the sheikh) is no longer within the family. It's in the community," says Karak Sheikh 'Utaiwi Al-Majali. Today, most tribal leaders come into their positions gradually and

informally -- it is more a process of being recognized as a trusted source of patronage and judgment by the beneficiaries of a sheikh's good offices. Over time, the term "sheikh" goes from a half-joking honorific to a recognized title.

¶5. (U) Sheikhs we met with compared their position to a "king of the hill" type game, in which they are constantly being challenged by pretenders and wanna-be tribal leaders. "Everyone wants to be a sheikh. A tribal leader always has to watch his back," says Abu Habis Al-Adwan, a sheikh from the Jordan Valley. Character assassination is the preferred method of challenging a sheikh's authority -- it can undermine a reputation for fairness while not revealing who is making the accusation.

¶6. (SBU) Lineage is often a factor in who becomes a sheikh and who does not, but our contacts assert that the most effective tribal leaders are generally made, not born. A particularly effective sheikh may groom a son as his successor, but a solid reputation and track record as a provider of services is usually more important than a family history of sheikhdom. Those who wish to pass on their legacy to a family member will choose the son who they think will represent the tribe most effectively (not always the first born, although that is most common) and produce a kind of public introduction ceremony. Financial support is often part of the bargain -- favorite sons are given "walking around money" which they use to build connections and provide services. Still, contacts note that "it is no longer enough to be the son of the sheikh." Education and previous experience in the bureaucracy are now important benchmarks for aspiring tribal leaders -- both produce evidence of

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connections that will serve the community well when it comes to obtaining services from the government.

Working For A Living

¶7. (U) Since sheikhs are expected to tend to the financial needs of their constituents, many tribal leaders live rather modestly. Those who are independently wealthy primarily rely on family money (often held in stock or stakes in holding companies). Others rely on closer relatives for the largesse necessary to keep their positions. Many sheikhs start out as wealthy landowners and take out loans against their holdings or sell property as necessary to maintain their ability to spread the wealth.

¶8. (U) Few sheikhs have day jobs. Running a tribe is a time-consuming enterprise -- one that requires constant networking, frequent travel, and the ability to focus on individual cases for long periods of time. Those sheikhs who do work tend to place themselves in positions which naturally overlap with their sheikhly responsibilities, such as mayorships of small towns or positions within the local branch of the Ministry of Interior. Since tribal leaders often act as liaisons between ordinary citizens and the government, experience and connections within the state are considered key qualifications.

¶9. (SBU) One way that sheikhs obtain compensation for their services is through a fee for use of connections. When a sheikh obtains a job for one of his kinsmen, he often draws a percentage of the new hire's salary for an agreed-upon length of time. Others will receive "gifts" of livestock or reimbursement for expenses incurred in making the connection. Similar payment is required by custom when sheikhs render judgments in cases involving social or moral crimes which are not punishable in a formal Jordanian court. While many tribal leaders charge for their services, the sheikhs we talked to generally agreed that such practices were unseemly and demean the moral authority of sheikhs. "Good sheikhs don't have a penny to their name," claims Mohammed Momani, a sheikh from Zarqa.

Beecroft